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Lisa Jackson
Headteacher
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Dear Mrs Jackson

Short inspection of Tow Law Millennium Primary School

Following my visit to the school on 3 October 2017, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. The visit was the first short inspection carried out since the school was judged to be good in January 2013.

This school continues to be good.

The leadership team has steadily improved the quality of teaching and learning since the last inspection, ensuring that pupils continue to benefit from a good standard of education. Most pupils make strong progress across the school and a higher than average proportion leave the school well prepared for their secondary school education. Pupils demonstrate excellent attitudes to learning. They are polite, considerate of others and behave very well around school. Leaders' work to instil pupils with a good understanding of the values which are fundamental in modern Britain has been particularly successful. Pupils recognise their responsibility to, as they stated, 'use their voice'. They take pride in the democratic processes in place in school, to elect school councillors and 'buddies', and make good use of the suggestions box. Pupils show respect for, and tolerance of, others, recognising that 'it doesn't matter what skin colour you have, or what religion you believe in – what matters is the person you are'. Consequently, this is a happy community, where pupils feel safe and nurtured by everyone around them. Parents are full of praise for the school, citing the approachability of leaders and the willingness of all staff to 'bend over backwards' to help and support pupils.

Since the previous inspection, you, ably supported by a strong team of senior leaders, have secured an improving trend of outcomes for pupils in all key stages. Better teaching has led to a sharp increase in pupils' achievement in phonics with, in 2017, a higher than average proportion of pupils in Year 1 reaching the expected standard. More pupils are

reaching the expected standards at the end of Year 2 in reading, writing and mathematics. After a dip in the outcomes achieved by pupils in reading at the end of Year 6 in 2016, leaders took swift action. Standards rose rapidly and, in 2017, a higher than average proportion of pupils reached the expected standards in the national assessments at the end of Year 6.

At the previous inspection, you were asked to improve the teaching of writing. Pupils now have more opportunities to write at length and for different purposes. The teaching of grammar and punctuation is more effective so that pupils apply these skills with greater accuracy. Pupils' workbooks show that many pupils are developing their own unique writing style. The impact of leaders' work is evident in the above average standards reached by pupils in writing by the end of Year 6 in 2017. However, you recognise that some pupils still make too many mistakes with their spelling, and leaders have set this as a priority for improvement this year.

During this inspection, I was keen to explore the progress made by children in the early years, especially boys and those who are disadvantaged. Leaders track the progress of children carefully and adapt provision successfully to meet the specific needs of individual children. A recent focus on improving boys' writing has been effective. In particular, children make strong progress in developing the personal, social and emotional skills they need so that they are ready for the curriculum in Year 1.

You know that not enough pupils are reaching the highest standards of attainment, particularly in mathematics. You have begun to tackle this. However, leaders and governors recognise that, historically, they have focused their monitoring largely on the proportions of pupils reaching expected standards for their age. While this has helped to raise standards over time, governors accept that they now need to keep a closer check on the school's work to meet the needs of the most able pupils.

Safeguarding is effective.

Leaders have ensured that safeguarding arrangements are fit for purpose. Several members of staff are trained to take a leading role in managing safeguarding. Leaders ensure that safeguarding is given high priority through regular discussions at staff meetings and through staff training. You keep abreast of current advice and guidance through reviewing the findings of published serious case reviews and use this knowledge to develop the school's practice. Records of safeguarding incidents are detailed and show that you engage well with other agencies to keep pupils safe.

The curriculum is effective in helping pupils to recognise and manage risks to their safety. Pupils articulate the importance of a healthy lifestyle and are aware of the benefits of regular exercise. They take full advantage of the high-quality physical education and sport provision on offer during and beyond the school day. Pupils know how to keep themselves safe online. Parents have benefited from your work to raise awareness of the risks of online grooming through different 'apps' which pupils might try to access from home. Pupils are also very proud to be school 'buddies' and take their leadership roles seriously. The 'buddies' meet weekly with you to receive training and to discuss ways to prevent bullying and encourage good behaviour. Pupils report that

bullying is exceptionally rare. All pupils and parents who responded to the online inspection questionnaires indicated that pupils feel safe in school.

You work closely with individual families to improve attendance. As a result, the overall attendance for the school is broadly in line with the national average. However, the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent, particularly those who are eligible for free school meals and those who receive support for their special educational needs and/or disabilities, is too high. Leaders and governors recognise that they need to keep a closer check on the impact of leaders' work to reduce the absence of these groups of pupils.

Inspection findings

- Over time, leaders have improved the teaching of mathematics. A strong and systematic focus on basic skills has ensured that most pupils have a secure knowledge of arithmetic. Highly effective teaching in upper key stage 2 has enabled pupils to make very rapid progress. In 2017, every pupil in Year 6 reached the expected standard in mathematics. However, leaders recognise that some inconsistencies in the quality of teaching remain and, consequently, not enough pupils are reaching the highest standard of attainment. The leader for mathematics knows that pupils need more opportunities to solve complex problems and explain their reasoning. You have begun to address this through staff training and support for individual teachers. Pupils' workbooks show that the most able pupils are being challenged, increasingly, to work at greater depth, but there is more to do to ensure that this is consistently effective in all classes.
- Following a dip in reading standards at the end of Year 6 in 2016, leaders reviewed the reading curriculum. Pupils now enjoy a new programme of independent reading and a range of rewards, which encourage them to read frequently. Pupils speak positively about the breadth of reading material available to them. Your careful analysis indicated that pupils needed to develop aspects of their comprehension skills and to increase the pace at which they read. Leaders' work to address this has resulted in improving outcomes for pupils at the end of Years 2 and 6. You continue to focus, correctly, on further raising the proportion of pupils reaching the highest standards of attainment.
- Improvements to the teaching of phonics have resulted in a higher than average proportion of pupils reaching the expected standard in the national phonics screening check at the end of Year 1. However, you realise that too few pupils across the school are using this knowledge of letters, and the sounds they represent, to help them to spell with accuracy. You have invested in resources to help with the teaching of spelling. All staff received training at the beginning of the current academic year to address this issue. This remains a priority for improvement and is being closely monitored by the leader for English to ensure that leaders' actions secure the desired improvement.
- Governors are highly committed to improving the school. They have ensured, through accessing training, that they understand the recent changes to the national curriculum and testing arrangements. The chair of governors is particularly diligent in ensuring that any new governors have the skills they need to make a strong contribution to the

governing body. Governors have challenged leaders, over time, to improve aspects of the school's performance and this has resulted in improved outcomes for pupils. However, governors recognise that, in their drive to raise standards for pupils, they have focused, predominantly, on ensuring that more pupils reach the expected standards for their age. While governors receive detailed reports on pupils' achievement, these do not focus sufficiently on the proportions of pupils attaining the highest standards.

Next steps for the school

Leaders and those responsible for governance should ensure that:

- more pupils make rapid progress to reach the highest standards of attainment, particularly in mathematics
- pupils use their knowledge of phonics to help them to spell accurately
- the proportion of pupils who are persistently absent, including those who are eligible for free school meals and those who have special educational needs and/or disabilities, reduces to being at least in line with the national average
- governors sharpen their monitoring of the work of school leaders, to keep a closer check on the outcomes achieved by the most able pupils and the attendance of different groups of pupils.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the regional schools commissioner and the director of children's services for Durham. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Claire Brown
Her Majesty's Inspector

Information about the inspection

During this one-day inspection, I met with you and other members of the senior leadership team. I also met with the chair of the governing body and two other governors. I discussed the school's journey of improvement with a representative of the local authority. I visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning jointly with you. I spoke to pupils during their lessons and met with a group of pupils from Years 2, 4 and 6. I reviewed pupils' work in a range of subjects in a sample of their workbooks. You presented information detailing pupils' progress and attainment, the school's self-evaluation document, the school's development plan and your arrangements for checking the performance of teachers. Documents relating to your work to safeguard pupils, including records of incidents, were checked. I reviewed the information and policies on the school's website. I considered the 18 responses to Ofsted's online questionnaire (Parent View), the 15 responses to Ofsted's pupil questionnaire and the nine responses to Ofsted's staff questionnaire.